

## Chapter 890

### The Topic of Pants

There were two shafts leading into the Brightheart city. One had been dug upwards by elemental messengers, and that had become the main shaft. The other had been dug down by regular messengers. It was now heavily fortified, even though the messengers on the surface were gone.

In that second shaft, Jason's avatar floated in the air, at the very edge of his domain. There was a Brightheart fortress on the spot and Jason was hovering in front of a wall that sealed the entire shaft. A woman appeared in front of him, just outside his area of control. She had plain, stark features, pale skin and dark hair. She wore a simple grey dress with a faded blue flower pattern.

"You want something from me," Death said.

"I do."

"Is a temple of my church in Brightheart territory conditional on getting what you want?"

"No. This is one thing and that is another. Your miracle helped save them. It put to rest their fallen who had been perverted into macabre creations. If they want to worship you for that, or even simply be grateful, I won't get in the way. To do so because you refused to give back something I already traded away would be petty."

Death nodded.

"Such would be unbecoming at our level. I will return what was taken, Jason Asano, now that it cannot be used for its original purpose."

She held out her hand and a sphere appeared over it, shimmering blue, silver and gold. Jason reached out to touch it and it vanished.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank you for stymieing Undeath. The greatest opportunity to enact his purpose in centuries was quashed because of you."

"It took a lot more than me to stop him, and he accomplished far more than I would like."

"We share this view. But we must accept that we did all we could, and celebrate that it was more than what was likely. In immortality, there are no absolutes in victory or defeat, especially over time. People live and die. Civilisations rise and fall. There will be a time when even this planet will be gone, and we gods with it, yet you will remain. You are so

very young for an immortal, and some things, only time can teach. But you will learn them, whether you like it or not.”

“I suppose I will. Thank you, Death.”

“Thank you, Jason Asano.”

The pair vanished, and the Brighthearts watching from inside the fortress allowed themselves to breathe again.

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The creation of the prime avatar was a surprisingly unspectacular affair. The reality material taken back from Death was added to the swarm of lights in Jason’s void and they coalesced into a body, floating naked and hairless in the dark. Jason stood at the doorway to the void in a basic avatar, along with his familiars.

“You should make some tweaks,” Colin suggested, pointed up and down at the body. “You could change that part.”

“You just pointed at the whole thing,” Jason said.

“I know where I was pointing.”

“You do realise you look exactly like it?”

“Yeah, but I make this look good. It’s about how you inhabit the body. Gravitax. You wouldn’t understand.”

Jason gave his familiar a flat look.

“Don’t feel bad,” Colin said. “I just happen to have a primal hunger that the ladies respond to.”

“Are you getting interested in women?”

“Ick, no. Wait, do I get to eat them?”

“No!”

“Then definitely not.”

“Please don’t go around eating women.”

“You’re saying that I can eat men?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I said okay,” Colin insisted while Jason stared at him with suspicion.

“Colin.”

“Yes?”

“You can’t eat gender fluid and non-binary people either.”

“Oh, come on. It’s like you don’t want me to eat anyone.”

"You can eat monsters."

"What about people who attack us? You want me to not help in fights until I make sure they aren't on the list of things I'm not allowed to eat?"

"Look, if it comes to a fight, you can... nibble."

"Nibble?"

"Yeah. Nibble."

"So, I can eat bits of people?"

"Bad people. In a fight."

"That sounds like a double standard."

"It's about context. It's like how, in everyday life, I don't get to stab people. But in a fight, I'm allowed to stab people. So, when we get in a fight with people, that's when you're allowed to, you know... eat them a little bit."

"So, if I start a fight, I *can* eat people?"

"No starting fights. And if a fight does happen you can only eat them *a little bit*. No fully eating people."

"Not ever?"

"Maybe if they're already dead. And they really sucked. Or it's really important you rebuild your biomass immediately."

"This is all too complicated," Colin said. "It sounds like you're making it up as you go along."

"That would be accurate, yes," Jason acknowledged.

"See, this is the problem," Colin said. "The ladies like me because I'm definitive in my actions. If I want something, I eat it."

"Please stop saying 'the ladies.'"

"One of us should," Colin said, pointing to the avatar floating in the void. "You clearly need some help, physically. Maybe reduce the chin a little."

"The chin did reduce a little."

"And there's that much left? How many rank ups will it take before you have a normal person's face?"

"You have the same face!"

"You need to grow back that beard. Do you still have some of Jory's hair growth cream?"

"Look, I just took the template for my body and adjusted for normal gold-rank changes. It will work better as a seat for my consciousness if I don't go messing around with it. And it's more an ointment than a cream."

“Mr Asano,” Shade interjected. “Could I, perchance, make a request?”

“Of course,” Jason said. “What do you need?”

“For this conversation to end before all two-hundred-and-eleven of my bodies decide to destroy themselves rather than continue listening to it.”

Jason looked at Shade from under raised eyebrows.

“It might be time to get started, yeah.”

Jason’s basic avatar vanished. The prime avatar floated out of the void and through the doorway. As its feet touched the catwalk, it opened its eyes. Jason’s consciousness settled into it, turning it from a thing into a person.

Jason felt the spiritual noise fade away as he inhabited his new avatar. For years he’d been dealing with an awareness of every action of every person in every domain he possessed. Louder were the countless people across the cosmos connected to the System. His perception of them was sealed away, lest it destroy his mind at his current level of power, but it was a cosmos worth of muted mumbles.

His perception of his domains and the System were still accessible, should he have need of them, but they weren’t pressing in on him. The prime avatar was like a quiet room in a busy house; the noise couldn’t get in until he stepped outside. For the first time in a long time, Jason felt like a relatively normal person.

He held out his hands and stared at them as he flexed his fingers. When he rubbed his hands together, he smiled at the sensation.

“A real body,” he said. “It’s still an avatar, I know, but it doesn’t feel like one.”

“Fingers aren’t all that,” Colin said. “I went without fingers for years, and I turned out fine. Can we go eat something now?”

Jason chuckled.

“Sure, buddy. Let’s go get some lunch.”

“Can it be people?”

“No! We just talked about this.”

“Can we be flexible? How about if I eat a crappy person.”

“What did I just say about eating people, Colin?”

“Wash them first?”

“I’m pretty sure I said don’t.”

“Then can we go have a fight? You said I can eat people when we’re fighting.”

“Mr Asano,” Shade said. “Perhaps before we engage with the topic of lunch, you should engage with the topic of pants.”

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A spherical cloud plunged through the upper atmosphere, dropping from a space station shaped like Jason's head. Flames ignited around the cloud from the friction of their rapid passage, but the cloud was unaffected. Inside the cloud it was cool and stable. Jason, in his new avatar body, relaxed and enjoyed the ride.

"I need to deal with the things inside my realm first," Jason told Shade. He was reclining in a cloud chair while Shade stood primly beside it. Colin and Gordon were eagerly watching the dancing orange light that filtered through the wall of the sphere.

"I would have thought you would rush outside your domain," Shade told Jason.

"I want to, and that's why I haven't. I've been in here so long that, once I leave, I'll keep finding excuses to not come back. Carlos has gone pretty stir-crazy as it is, and I should prioritise his work in any case. It can help a lot of people. Maybe even some of the vampires on Earth."

"I counsel keeping your expectations measured, Mr Asano. Even if he is successful, in developing a treatment for vampirism, it will only work on lesser vampires. Those who have had the curse forcibly inflicted upon them. That is not common on Earth. The vampires there have always been cautious when propagating their own kind. They make ghouls and blood servants rather than lesser vampires."

"I know," Jason said softly. "It's just that so many have died, or been bled out in those horrifying farms. It makes me wonder if I should have stayed and fought."

"No, Mr Asano. I can confidently say that if you had stayed, you and the vampires would have ultimately entered a race to see who could inflict the worst atrocities on the other. I have no doubt you would have won against the vampires, but it would be the Earth that lost. Be it you or the vampire queen, the world would be ruled by a monster."

"Yeah," Jason agreed. "I guess leaving was best."

"And humanity must be allowed to resolve its own challenges."

"Do you ever get sick of being right, Shade?"

"I have made my own mistakes, Mr Asano. You just don't notice with the frequency and magnitude of yours."

Colin utterly failed to smother a laugh while Gordon's giggle was the sound of a trickling stream. Jason shook his head at the abject betrayal of his familiars.

As their descent continued, Jason pulled up his character sheet. Looking over his abilities, he smiled at the effects of using great astral beings to grind levels. His abilities ranged from the third to fifth level of gold rank, and for the first time, his perception power wasn't the highest, if only by a slim margin.

His cloak power was integral to the way he fought, even the way he moved. It had become a part of him and he felt exposed without it. But while he had no shame in his chuuni ways, spending all his time in a cloak made of darkness was too edgelord for even him.

The cloak was also the opposite of incognito. Now that Jason could disguise his magic eyes as normal ones, many activities would be a lot easier. Something as simple as going into a bakery and buying a pie would be less hassle if his nebulous eyes were hidden. A void cloak that was blown by dimensional winds would undermine that significantly.

The biggest change was that he had left the identity of an outworlder behind. Originally, his character screen had listed his race as a formerly human outworlder. It now said 'nature' instead of race, calling him a 'prime avatar of an astral nexus.' He wasn't sure if dropping the term 'race' meant he was now beyond mortal classification, or if the system had gotten more politically correct.

Was it an internal change, based on his nature or changing sensibilities, or something more external? Social change was slow in Pallimustus, but rapid in many parts of Earth, especially the ones Jason dealt with. Was the system reacting to changing values? He decided to put the question to Shade.

"The System is clearly tied to you, Mr Asano, but also to the cosmos at large, now. As such, I am not sure anyone other than you could determine the truth. If I were to forward a hypothesis, it would be that 'race' is a term you took from games on Earth and cannot adequately represent the breadth of individuals it now needs to. As such, it has taken the broad term 'nature' to represent the nature of people across the cosmos."

"That makes sense. I've still got the six powers that used to be racial gifts. They seem a bit OP, if I'm being entirely honest."

"Mr Asano, your transcendence, incomplete as it is, has taken the form of an astral nexus. While this is not something I am aware of from experience, it seems clear that what you are a nexus of is astral kings, great astral beings, and gods. The three supreme entities of the cosmos. You may be lacking in capabilities compared to each — often significantly so — but your power reflects aspects of all three. As your prime avatar is a direct embodiment of that power, were you expecting any less?"

"That's fair, I guess."

"And you should not underestimate the abilities of others. What may seem unassuming at first may prove more powerful than you realise. Look at the abilities of Mr Standish. His gifts focus on knowledge and magic. Not overtly powerful, but in playing to

his strengths, they led him down a certain path. Imagine if he had more generic abilities that did not make full use of his astounding mind. If he used special attacks instead of spells, like most humans. Would he be a middle of the road adventurer that no one had ever heard of, or a Magic Society official in a backwater branch? What of the knowledge he used to stop the Builder from initiating his invasion years early? Would he have spent the years of your absence devising a method to repair the link between two universes? You change worlds, Mr Asano, but so does he. Without him, you would have failed many times, and it was his inherent abilities and their evolutions that set him down that path. Just as you do for you.”

“That’s definitely true. My abilities almost seem disappointing when you put it that way.”

“I am disappointed in the one that allows me to turn my shadow bodies into transport. Now that it allows Colin and Gordon to alter a vehicle I create, I just know they’re going add...”

The shadow creature shuddered.

“...colours.”